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- I’m in Marsport without Hilda

I'm in Marsport without Hilda
by Isaac Asimov

It worked itself out, to begin with, like a dream. I didn't have to make any arrangement. I didn't have to touch it. I just watched things work out.—Maybe that's when I should have first smelled catastrophe.

It began with my usual month's layoff between assignments. A month on and a month off is the right and proper routine for the Galactic Service. I reached Marsport for the usual three-day layover before the short hop to Earth.

Ordinarily, Hilda, God bless her, as sweet a wife as any man ever had, would be there waiting for me and we'd have a nice sedate time of it—a nice little interlude for the two of us. The only trouble with that is that Marsport is the rowdiest spot in the System, and a nice little interlude isn't exactly what fits in. Only, how do I explain that to Hilda, hey?

Well, *this* time, my mother-in-law, God *bless* her (for a change) got sick just two days before I reached Marsport, and the night before landing, I got a spacegram from Hilda saying she would stay on Earth with her mother and wouldn't meet me this one time.

I 'grammed back my loving regrets and my feverish anxiety concerning her mother and when I landed, there I was—

I was in Marsport without Hilda!

That was still nothing, you understand. It was the frame of the picture, the bones of the woman. Now there was the matter of the lines and coloring inside the frame; the skin and flesh outside the bones.

So I called up Flora (Flora of certain rare episodes in the past) and for the purpose I used a video booth.—Damn the expense; full speed ahead.

I was giving myself ten to one odds she'd be out, she'd be busy with her videophone disconnected, she'd be dead, even.

But she was in, with her videophone connected, and Great Galaxy, was she anything but dead.

She looked better than ever. Age cannot wither, as somebody or other once said, nor custom stale her infinite variety.

Was she glad to see me? She squealed, "Max! It's been years."

"I know, Flora, but this is it, if you're available. Because guess what! I'm in Marsport without Hilda."

She squealed again, "Isn't that *nice!* Then come on over."

I goggled a bit. This was too much. "You mean you *are* available?" You have to understand that Flora was never available

without plenty of notice. Well, she was that kind of knockout.

She said, “Oh, I’ve got some quibbling little arrangement, Max, but I’ll take care of that. You come on over.”

“I’ll come,” I said happily.

Flora was the kind of girl—Well, I tell you, she had her rooms under Martian gravity, 0.4 Earth-normal. The gadget to free her of Marsport’s pseudo-grav field was expensive of course, but if you’ve ever held a girl in your arms at 0.4 gees, you need no explanation. If you haven’t, explanations will do no good. I’m also sorry for you.

Talk about floating on clouds.

I closed connections, and only the prospect of seeing it all in the flesh could have made me wipe out the image with such alacrity. I stepped out of the booth.

And at that point, that precise point, that very split-instant of time, the first whiff of catastrophe nudged itself up to me.

That first whiff was the bald head of that lousy Rog Crinton of the Mars offices, gleaming over a headful of pale blue eyes, pale yellow complexion, and pale brown mustache. I didn’t bother getting on all fours and beating my forehead against the ground because my vacation had started the minute I had gotten off the ship.

So I said with only normal politeness, “What do you want and I’m in a hurry. I’ve got an appointment.”

He said, “You’ve got an appointment with me. I was waiting for you at the unloading desk.”

I said, “I didn’t see you—”

He said, “You didn’t see anything.”

He was right at that, for, come to think of it, if he was at the unloading desk, he must have been spinning ever since because I went past that desk like Halley’s Comet skimming the Solar Corona.

I said, “All right. What do you want?”

“I’ve got a little job for you.”

I laughed. “It’s my month off, friend.”

He said, “Red emergency alert, friend.”

Which meant, no vacation, just like that. I couldn’t believe it. I said, “Nuts, Rog. Have a heart. I got an emergency alert of my own.”

“Nothing like this.”

“Rog,” I yelled, “can’t you get someone else? Anyone else?”

“You’re the only Class A agent on Mars.”

“Send to Earth, then. They stack agents like micro-pile units at Headquarters.”

“This has got to be done before 11p.m. What’s the matter? You haven’t got three hours?”

I grabbed my head. The boy just didn’t *know*. I said, “Let me make a call, will you?”

I stepped back into the booth, glared at him, and said, “Private!”

Flora shone on the screen again, like a mirage on an asteroid. She said, “Something wrong, Max? Don’t say something’s wrong. I canceled my other engagement.”

I said, “Flora, baby, I’ll be there. I’ll *be* there. But something’s come up.”

She asked the natural question in a hurt tone of voice and I said, *“No.* Not another girl. With you in the same town they don’t make any other girls. Females, maybe. Not girls. Baby! Honey!” (I had a wild impulse but hugging ’vision screen is no pastime for a grown man.) “It’s business. Just hold on. It won’t take long.”

She said, “All right,” but she said it kind of like it was just enough not all right so that I got the shivers.

I stepped out of the booth and said, “All right, Rog, what kind of mess have you cooked up for me?”

We went into the spaceport bar and got us an insulated booth. He said, “The *Antares Giant* is coming in from Sirius in exactly half an hour; at 8p.m. local time.”

“Okay.”

“Three men will get out, among others, and will wait for the *Space Eater* coming in from Earth at 11p.m. and leaving for Capella some time thereafter. The three men will get on the *Space Eater* and will then be out of our jurisdiction.”

“So.”

“So between 8:00 and 11:00, they will be in a special waiting room and you will be with them. I have a trimensional image of each for you so you’ll know which they are and which is which. You have between 8:00 and 11:00 to decide which one of the three is carrying contraband.”

“What kind of contraband?”

“The worst kind. Altered Spaceoline.”

“Altered Spaceoline?”

He had thrown me. I knew what Spaceoline was. If you’ve been on a space-hop you know, too. And in case you’re Earth-bound yourself the bare fact is that everyone needs it on the first space-trip; almost everybody needs it for the first dozen trips; lots need it every trip. Without it, there is vertigo associated with free fall, screaming terrors, semi-permanent psychoses. With it, there is nothing; no one minds a thing. And it isn’t habit-forming; it has no adverse side-effects. Spaceoline is ideal, essential, unsubstitutable. When in doubt, take Spaceoline.

Rog said, “That’s right, altered Spaceoline. It can be changed chemically by a very simple reaction that can be conducted in anyone’s basement into a drug that will give one giant-size charge and

become your baby-blue habit the first time. It is on a par with the most dangerous alkaloids we know."

"And we just found out about it?"

"No. The Service has known about it for years, and we've kept others from knowing by squashing every discovery flat. Only now the discovery has gone too far."

"In what way?"

"One of the men who will be stopping over at this spaceport is carrying some of the altered Spaceoline on his person. Chemists in the Capellan system, which is outside the Federation, will analyze it and set up ways of synthesizing more. After that, it's either fight the worst drug menace we've ever seen or suppress the matter by suppressing the source."

"You mean Spaceoline."

"Right. And if we suppress Spaceoline, we suppress space travel."

I decided to put my finger on the point. "Which one of the three has it?"

Rog smiled nastily, "If we knew, would we need you? You're to find out which of the three."

"You're calling on me for a lousy frisk job."

"Touch the wrong one at the risk of a haircut down to the larynx. Every one of the three is a big man on his own planet. One is Edward Harponaster; one is Joaquin Lipsky; and one is Andiamo Ferrucci. Well?"

He was right. I'd heard of every one of them. Chances are you have, too; and not one was touchable without proof in advance, as you know. I said, "Would one of them touch a dirty deal like—"

"There are trillions involved," said Rog, "which means any one of the three would. And one of them *is,* because Jack Hawk got that far before he was killed—"

"Jack Hawk's *dead?"* For a minute, I forgot about the Galactic drug menace. For a minute, I nearly forgot about Flora.

"Right, and one of those guys arranged the killing. Now you find out which. You put the finger on the right one before 11:00 and there's a promotion, a raise in pay, a pay-back for poor Jack Hawk, and a rescue of the Galaxy. You put the finger on the wrong one and there'll be a nasty interstellar situation and you'll be out on your ear and also on every black list from here to Antares and back."

I said, "Suppose I don't finger anybody?"

"That would be like fingering the wrong one as far as the Service is concerned."

"I've got to finger someone but only the right one or my head's handed to me."

"In thin slices. You're beginning to understand me, Max."

In a long lifetime of looking ugly, Rog Crinton had never looked uglier. The only comfort I got out of staring at him was the realization that he was married, too, and that he lived with his wife at Marsport all year round. And does he deserve that. Maybe I'm hard on him, but he *deserves* it.

I put in a quick call to Flora, as soon as Rog was out of sight.

She said, "Well?"

I said, "Baby, honey, it's something I can't talk about, but I've got to do it, see? Now you hang on, I'll get it over with if I have to swim the Grand Canal to the icecap in my underwear, see? If I have to claw Phobos out of the sky. If I have to cut myself in pieces and mail myself parcel post."

"Gee," she said, "if I thought I was going to have to wait—"

I winced. She just wasn't the type to respond to poetry.

Actually, she was a simple creature of action—But after all, if I was going to be drifting through low-gravity in a sea of jasmine perfume with Flora, poetry-response is not the type of qualification I would consider most indispensable.

I said urgently, "Just hold on, Flora. I won't be any time at all. I'll make it up to you."

I was annoyed, sure, but I wasn't worried as yet. Rog hadn't more than left me when I figured out exactly how I was going to tell the guilty man from the others.

It was easy. I should have called Rog back and told him, but there's no law against wanting egg in your beer and oxygen in your air. It would take me five minutes and then off I would go to Flora; a little late, maybe, but with a promotion, a raise, and a slobbering kiss from the Service on each cheek.

You see, it's like this. Big industrialists don't go space-hopping much; they use trans-video reception. When they do go to some ultra-high interstellar conference, as these three were probably going, they take Spaceoline. For one thing, they don't have enough hops under their belt to risk doing without. For another, Spaceoline is the expensive way of doing it and industrialists do things the expensive way. I know their psychology.

Now that would hold for two of them. The one who carried contraband, however, couldn't risk Spaceoline—even to prevent space-sickness. Under Spaceoline influence, he could throw the drug away; or give it away; or talk gibberish about it. He would *have* to stay in control of himself.

It was as simple as that, so I waited.

The *Antares Giant* was on time and I waited with my leg muscles tense for a quick take-off as soon as I collared the murdering drug-toting rat and sped the two eminent captains of industry on their way.

They brought in Lipsky first. He had thick, ruddy lips, rounded jowls, very dark eyebrows, and graying hair. He just looked at me and sat down. Nothing. He was under Spaceoline.

I said, “Good evening, sir.”

He said, in a dreamy voice, “Surrealismus of Panamy hearts in three-quarter time for a cup of coffeedom of speech.”

That was Spaceoline all the way. The buttons in the human mind were set free-swing. Each syllable suggests the next in free association.

Andiamo Ferrucci came in next. Black mustache, long and waxed, olive complexion, pock-marked face. He took a seat in another chair, facing us.

I said, “Nice trip?”

He said, “Trip the light fantastic tock the clock is crowings on the bird.”

Lipsky said, “Bird to the wise guyed book to all places every body.”

I grinned. That left Harponaster. I had my needle gun neatly palmed out of sight and the magnetic coil ready to grip him.

And then Harponaster came in. He was thin, leathery, near-bald and rather younger than he seemed in his trimensional image. And he was Spaceolined to the gills.

I said, “Damn!”

Harponaster said, “Damyankee note speech to his last time I saw wood you say so.”

Ferrucci said, “Sow the seed the territory under dispute do well to come along long road to a nightingale.”

Lipsky said, “Gay lords hopping pong balls.”

I stared from one to the other as the nonsense ran down in shorter and shorter spurts and then silence.

I got the picture, all right. One of them was faking. He had thought ahead and realized that omitting the Spaceoline would be a giveaway. He might have bribed an official into injecting saline or dodged it some other way.

One of them must be faking. It wasn’t hard to fake the thing. Comedians on sub-etheric had a Spaceoline skit regularly. *You’ve* heard them.

I stared at them and got the first prickle at the base of my skull that said: What if you *don’t* finger the right one?

It was 8:30 and there was my job, my reputation, my head growing rickety upon my neck to be considered. I saved it all for later and thought of Flora. She wasn’t going to wait for me forever. For that matter, chances were she wouldn’t wait for half an hour.

I wondered. Could the faker keep up free association if nudged gently onto dangerous territory?

I said, “The floor’s covered with a nice solid rug” and ran the last two words together to make it “soli drug.”

Lipsky said, “Drug from underneath the dough re mi fa sol to be saved.”

Ferrucci said, “Saved and a haircut above the common herd something about younicorny as a harmonican the cheek by razor and shine.”

Harponaster said, “Shiner wind nor snow use trying to by four ever and effervescence and sensibilityter totter.”

Lipsky said, “Totters and rags.”

Ferrucci said, “Ragsactly.”

Harponaster said, “Actlymation.”

A few grunts and they ran down.

I tried again and I didn’t forget to be careful. They would remember everything I said afterward and what I said had to be harmless. I said, “This is a darned good space-line.”

Ferrucci said, “Lines and tigers through the prairie dogs do bark of the bough-wough—”

I interrupted, looking at Harponaster, “A darned good space-line.”

“Line the bed and rest a little black sheepishion of wrong the clothes of a perfect day.”

I interrupted again, glaring at Lipsky, “Good space-line.”

“Liron is hot chocolate ain’t gonna be the same on you vee and double the stakes and potatoes and heel.”

Some one else said, “Heel the sicknecessaryd and write will wincetance.”

“Tance with mealtime.”

“I’m comingle.”

“Inglish.”

“Ishter seals.”

“Eels.”

I tried a few more times and got nowhere. The faker, whichever he was, had practiced or had natural talents at talking free association. He was disconnecting his brain and letting the words come out any old way. And he must be inspired by knowing exactly what I was after. If “drug” hadn’t given it away, “space-line” three times repeated must have. I was safe with the other two, but *he* would know.

—And he was having fun with me. All three were saying phrases that might have pointed to a deep inner guilt (“sol to be saved,” “little black sheepishion of wrong,” “drug from underneath,” and so on). Two were saying such things helplessly, randomly. The third was amusing himself.

So how did I find the third? I was in a feverish thrill of hatred

against him and my fingers twitched. The rat was subverting the Galaxy. More than that, he had killed my colleague and friend. More than that, he was keeping me from Flora.

I could go up to each of them and start searching. The two who were really under Spaceoline would make no move to stop me. They could feel no emotion, no fear, no anxiety, no hate, no passion, no desire for self-defense. And if one made the slightest gesture of resistance I would have my man.

But the innocent ones would remember afterward. They would remember a personal search while under Spaceoline.

I sighed. If I tried it, I would get the criminal all right but later I would be the nearest thing to chopped liver any man had ever been. There would be a shake-up in the Service, a big stink the width of the Galaxy, and in the excitement and disorganization, the secret of altered Spaceoline would get out anyway and so what the hell.

Of course, the one I wanted might be the first one I touched. One chance out of three. I'd have one out and only God can make a three.

Nuts, something had started them going while I was muttering to myself and Spaceoline is contagioust a gigolo my, oh—

I stared desperately at my watch and my line of sight focused on 9:15.

Where the devil was time going to?

Oh, my; oh, nuts; oh, Flora!

I had no choice. I made my way to the booth for another quick call to Flora. Just a quick one, you understand, to keep things alive; assuming they weren't dead already.

I kept saying to myself: She won't answer.

I tried to prepare myself for that. There were other girls, there were other—

What's the use, there were no other girls.

If Hilda had been in Marsport, I never would have had Flora on my mind in the first place and it wouldn't have mattered. *But I was in Marsport without Hilda* and I had made a date with Flora.

The signal was signaling and signaling and I didn't dare break off.

Answer! Answer!

She answered. She said, "It's *you!"*

"Of course, sweetheart, who else would it be?"

"Lots of people. Someone who would *come."*

"There's just this little detail of business, honey."

"What business? Plastons for who?"

I almost corrected her grammar but I was too busy wondering what this plastons kick was.

Then I remembered. I told her once I was a plaston salesman. That was the time I brought her a plaston nightgown that was a

honey.

I said, “Look. Just give me another half hour—”

Her eyes grew moist. “I’m sitting here all by myself.”

“I’ll make it up to you.” To show you how desperate I was getting, I was definitely beginning to think along paths that could lead only to jewelry even though a sizable dent in the bankbook would show up to Hilda’s piercing eye like the Horsehead Nebula interrupting the Milky Way. But then I was desperate.

She said, “I had a perfectly good date and I broke it off.”

I protested, “You said it was a quibbling little arrangement.”

That was a mistake. I knew it the minute I said it.

She shrieked, *“Quibbling little arrangement!”* (It was what she had said. It was what she had said. But having the truth on your side just makes it worse in arguing with a woman. Don’t I know?) “You call a man who’s promised me an estate on Earth—”

She went on and on about that estate on Earth. There wasn’t a gal in Marsport who wasn’t wangling for an estate on Earth, and you could count the number who got one on the sixth finger of either hand.

I tried to stop her. No use.

She finally said, “And here I am all alone, with *nobody,”* and broke off contact.

Well, she was right. I felt like the lowest heel in the Galaxy.

I went back into the reception room. A flunky outside the door saluted me in.

I stared at the three industrialists and speculated on the order in which I would slowly choke each to death if I could but receive choking orders. Harponaster first, maybe. He had a thin, stringy neck that the fingers could go round neatly and a sharp Adam’s apple against which the thumbs could find purchase.

It cheered me up infinitesimally, to the point where I mustered, “Boy!” just out of sheer longing, though it was no boy I was longing for.

It started them off at once. Ferrucci said, “Boyl the watern the spout you goateeming rain over us, God savior pennies—”

Harponaster of the scrawny neck added, “Nies and nephew don’t like orporalley cat.”

Lipsky said, “Cattle corral go down off a ductilitease drunk.”

“Drunkle aunterior passageway! a while.”

“While beasts oh pray.”

“Prayties grow.”

“Grow way.”

“Waiter.”

“Terble.”

"Ble."

Then nothing.

They stared at me. I stared at them. They were empty of emotion (or two were) and I was empty of ideas. And time passed.

I stared at them some more and thought about Flora. It occurred to me that I had nothing to lose that I had not already lost. I might as well talk about her.

I said, "Gentlemen, there is a girl in this town whose name I will not mention for fear of compromising her. Let me describe her to you, gentlemen."

And I did. If I say so myself, the last two hours had honed me to such a fine force-field edge that the description of Flora took on a kind of poetry that seemed to be coming from some wellspring of masculine force deep in the subbasement of my unconscious.

And they sat frozen, almost as though they were listening, and hardly ever interrupting. People under Spaceoline have a kind of politeness about them. They won't speak when someone else is speaking. That's why they take turns.

I kept it up with a kind of heartfelt sadness in my voice until the loud-speaker announced in stirring tones the arrival of the *Space Eater*.

That was that. I said in a loud voice, "Rise, gentlemen."

"Not you, you murderer," and my magnetic coil was on Ferrucci's wrist before he could breathe twice.

Ferrucci fought like a demon. He was under no Spaceoline influence. They found the altered Spaceoline in thin flesh-colored plastic pads hugging the inner surface of his thighs. You couldn't see it at all; you could only feel it, and even then it took a knife to make sure.

Afterward, Rog Crinton, grinning and half insane with relief, held me by the lapel with a death grip. "How did you do it? What gave it away?"

I said, trying to pull loose, "One of them was faking a Spaceoline jag. I was sure of it. So I told them," (I grew cautious—none of his business as to the details, you know) "… uh, about a girl, see, and two of them never reacted, so they were Spaceolined. But Ferrucci's breathing speeded up and the beads of sweat came out on his forehead. I gave a pretty dramatic rendition, and he reacted, so he was under no Spaceoline. Now will you let me go?"

He let go and I almost fell over backward.

I was set to take off. My feet were pawing the ground without any instruction from me—but then I turned back.

"Hey, Rog," I said, "can you sign me a chit for a thousand credits without its going on the record—for services rendered to the service?"

That's when I realized he was half insane with relief and very

temporary gratitude, because he said, “Sure, Max, sure. Ten thousand credits if you want.”

“I *want,”* Isaid, grabbing him for a change. “I want. I want.”

He filled out an official Service chit for ten thousand credits; good as cash anywhere in half the Galaxy. He was actually grinning as he gave it to me and you can bet I was grinning as I took it.

How *he* intended accounting for it was his affair; the point was that *I* wouldn’t have to account for it to Hilda.

I stood in the booth, one last time, signaling Flora. I didn’t dare let matters go till I reached her place. The additional half hour might just give her time to get someone else, if she hadn’t already.

Make her answer. Make her answer. Make her—

She answered, but she was in formal clothes. She was going out and I had obviously caught her by two minutes.

“I am going out,” she announced. *“Some* men can be decent. And I do not wish to see you in the henceforward. I do not wish ever to find my eyes upon you. You will do me a great favor, Mister Whoeveryouare, if you unhand my signal combination and never pollute it with—”

I wasn’t saying anything. I was just standing there holding my breath and also holding the chit up where she could see it. Just standing there. Just holding.

Sure enough, at the word “pollute” she came in for a closer look. She wasn’t much on education, that girl, but she could read “ten thousand credits” faster than any college graduate in the Solar System.

She said, “Max! For me?”

“All for you, baby,” I said, “I told you I had a little business to do. I wanted to surprise you.”

“Oh, Max, that’s sweet of you. I didn’t really mind. I was joking. Now you come right here to me.” She took off her coat.

“What about your date?” I said.

“I *said* I was joking,” she said.

“I’m coming,” I said faintly.

“With every single one of those credits now,” she said roguishly.

“With every single one,” I said.

I broke contact, stepped out of the booth, and now, finally, I was set—set—

I heard my name called. “Max! Max!” Someone was running toward me. “Rog Crinton said I would find you here. Mamma’s all right after all, so I got special passage on the *Space Eater* and what’s this about ten thousand credits?”

I didn’t turn. I said, “Hello, Hilda.”

And then I turned and did the hardest thing I ever succeeded in doing in all my good-for-nothing, space-hopping life.

I managed to smile.